
NORTH MACEDONIA NEARS ACCESSION TALKS, ALBANIA FALLING BEHIND

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Member states will on Tuesday (18 June) postpone a decision on opening accession talks with North Macedonia and Albania, most likely until September, as almost all capitals are prepared to green light Skopje while Tirana still remains a no-go for a few, EU officials and diplomats told EURACTIV.

Last year, member states agreed that the EU would decide this June whether to launch membership talks with the two countries. It is now seen as a credibility test for the EU in the Western Balkans region and beyond.

The Commission recommended in May to start the negotiations, given that North Macedonia and Albania fulfilled all the requirements to do so. Once the talks start, the process will last for several years and even then membership is not guaranteed.

The General Affairs Council (GAC), however, will not decide on the issue on Tuesday, as Germany is not ready to take a position because it still needs to complete its internal process in parliament.

As a result, EU officials and diplomats told EURACTIV the decision will be postponed, most likely until September.

In the meantime, a consensus is emerging on giving the go-ahead to North Macedonia, while Albania is struggling to reach the required unanimity among the 28, the sources said. Skopje is praised in particular for having reached a historic agreement with Greece on its name, an issue that has blocked progress for years.

A diplomat said that among the majority of countries in favour of a positive outcome (up to 15 governments), only Italy insists on keeping the membership prospects of the two Balkan candidates together.

Decoupling the two seems increasingly likely as some of the biggest sceptics about enlargement are ready to give their blessing to North Macedonia, particularly the Netherlands and Germany.

Last Wednesday, the Dutch parliament adopted a resolution highly critical about Albania, in particular on corruption and organised crime. But no concerns were raised about North Macedonia.

Against this backdrop, an EU diplomat was under the impression that The Hague would not reject opening accession talks with North Macedonia when the matter was discussed by the EU ambassadors last week.

The ambassadors discussion was long and difficult, another diplomat said but Albania remained a no-go for the Dutch government, the source added.

Johann Waderphul, a CDU deputy in the Bundestag, was quoted by a Macedonia newspaper saying that his group could approve the talks with North Macedonia by the end of September.

Only France, the other big opponent, is still considering its position. A French diplomat said they are reflecting on whether to follow the Dutch position on North Macedonia.

In the case of Albania, opening the process is premature, the source added.

Paris, and President Emmanuel Macron, in particular, insists that the EU should first become stronger before it becomes bigger.

Another diplomat explained that Paris and the Commission hold the key for North Macedonia, as they will have to decide whether they will decouple both countries.

An EU official insisted that the Commission would not make such a proposal and the ball is in the Councils court.

In an exclusive interview with EURACTIV last week, North Macedonias president, Stevo Pendarovski, admitted that the biggest problem was the decoupling with Albania.

Albania is now in disarray. The opposition has walked out of institutions and its getting tenser. So what can we say here? We have had positive recommendations from the Commission before, and weve been decoupled before, he said.

Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama also visited Brussels last week to guarantee the readiness of his country.

I think that its time for Europe to do what we expect after having delivered [] to recognise our merit and to switch a green light for accession talks, Rama said after meeting with Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker in Brussels.

Date

The other big question mark is when the member states will take the decision. EU ambassadors were expected to work until Monday (17 June) on the wording of the GACs conclusions.

A majority of countries, the Commission and the European External Action Service are in favour of opening the process as soon as possible.

However, France, the Netherlands and Denmark argued that they needed more time to assess the Commissions opinion before taking a decision.

EU officials explained that the options on the table for the wording of the date were opening the

talks as soon as possible, no later than September, or both combined.

That implies that the decision could be taken in July, August or September, with the latter being the most likely outcome, the sources agreed.

For some countries in favour of enlargement, not including any date would be unacceptable as it would be too vague, an EU official explained.

Adding pressure

Meanwhile, the friends of enlargement group has stepped up its pressure in recent days to counter the existing resistance.

A group of 13 countries (Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia, the Czech Republic, Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Italy, Austria, Croatia, Slovenia and Malta) issued a joint statement on 11 June, reaffirming the EUs commitment to the Western Balkans European integration.

The statement was described by a diplomat as a call in favour of starting the negotiations with North Macedonia and Albania.

Sweden, Greece and the UK, who did not sign the letter, also defended a positive outcome for Skopje and Tirana during last weeks discussions among EU ambassadors.

In particular, Sweden said that Tuesdays conclusions should state clearly when a decision would be taken, in order to show that the member states uphold the promise made last year.

Enlargement and the accession talks of these two countries are likely to be discussed by the EU leaders later this week, although the wording of the conclusions remains open, depending on the GACs outcome.

France preferred to wait for Tuesdays results to see whether the issue should be included on the summits agenda.

Credibility

As crunch time is nearing for accession candidates, both sides appeal to credibility in order to make their case, although for different reasons.

The large majority of the friends of enlargement group considered that failing to open the accession talks with these countries would damage the EUs credibility in the Western Balkans and beyond, and European official said.

In addition, it could bring fresh instability to the volatile region, where China and Russias influence is already growing through large investments and propaganda.

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